

The Birds of Rhiannon

Ian Irvine

I

Your gifts: songs that never really entertained,
By three black birds on the lamp-post singing
Creatures cursed as much as charmed - still
The deal was sealed with longing

And everyone moved on - you fed the horses
And I fed the birds (the Birds of Rhiannon)
Three skylarks (to be exact) on the lamp-post
Singing - singing such sad, sweet songs.

Three birds (and a photograph), nothing more
In the witch hours freezing - shrouded creatures -
Still, I fed those birds (those Birds of Rhiannon)
And they rewarded me with useless song.

One day a dead man sat up, groggily. He cocked
A rotten ear and stared at those birds - in
The witch hours freezing (shrouded creatures)
Gasped and, without a thankyou, he moved on

Later we met a leper, her skin unearthly white,
Face bruised, eyes bloodshot and pleading with
Those Birds (those Birds of Rhiannon) - their song
Sure enough, was healing, and so she too moved on

Without a thankyou - for joy forgets reward
Even to the worthy. And besides, the birds
Were not yet done: for a berserker charged us
Blood rage boiling, axe head swinging,

Death approaching - I was ill-prepared to fight -
Thankfully the birds disarmed the Viking, though
I do not know how - for they'd charmed me into
Sleep - the deepest sleep (those Birds of Rhiannon).

II

I have known no celebrity or praise - after all
Your gifts: songs that never really entertained -
Still, I have witnessed miracles, wonders of song,
By three black birds (skylarks to be exact) on

A lamp-post singing (three Birds of Rhiannon).

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The Witch Goddess of Snowdonia

Ian Irvine

On the way down—
 throb of injured knee—
I rest above the lake,
 the desolate lake, its
slate rubble banks (snow-worn),
its sheer, dark escarpments,
 the remains of a stone house
 jumble-tumbled now to a stark ridge
of blue and jagged rocks.

Ideal abode for a witch goddess

Her country—I do not doubt it—
 especially in winter
 at three thousand feet.

Cerridwen:
 queen of bards, cauldrons
and mountain scree!

And what *was* it she left here
 (at the Panting Cliff)—
a wolf or an eagle?
I don't remember
I'm sweating, and nothing pure
 to drink.

I check my watch, notice
clouds thicken about the cliff-top
 and the sun is weaker -
the sensation of coldness
as
 a soft white mist
wind-stirred
 spreads slowly across the lake -
the impression of a cauldron
 bubbling, brewing, frothing.

It's getting late
 I pack up my epiphany
and trudge downwards, one step at a time,
 (twiny knee)
in the direction of Mona
 Isle of druids and fighter-jets,
 burial mounds and helicopters.

As a witch-goddess,
 of course, she'd fly to Mona
She still had wings
 at the close of the Bronze Age.

The Ghost Narrates

Ian Irvine

'The minstrel's lay [concerning events in the Trojan war] caused Odysseus to lift his purple mantle with his sturdy hands and draw it down over his head to hide his comely face, for he was ashamed to be caught weeping by the Phaeacians'. [from Book 8 of *The Odyssey*, Penguin edition.]

Reduced to a ghost – having fallen early – I did not take part in the greater dramas here narrated. Instead, the maker of worlds set me learned tasks – observing and recording all that befell the warriors (though I will call them athletes) of my stolid generation.

Insubstantial, light on the wind, I hover at the close of a long story. The ranks are all refreshed – but our dreams of seizing the glittering edifice recede by the day (a dream for others now). And the dream inspired our every purposed act – brutal, graceful or athletic.

Many have already passed over. Their blood-smeared regalia useless to them now – on the way to a different city – glory or infamy ascribed by judicious bards. They pass me non-plussed, for I wear the oldest uniform. Their sleep-infected eyes see but a youth.

My tenure almost over – I mingle these days with old soldiers, toothless, grey-bearded, shaky of hand. They direct the young – if worthy – more often, signing papers and organising rations. Why do they linger? Have they no wives and children to enjoy in their autumn years?

The wind does not answer my questions, and so I continue to listen and observe. An old friend – we were on the first ships together – bewails his fate, 'The siege' he whispers, though none are close to hear, 'devoured everything – became my only purpose, my legacy and my wife.'

So many campaigns to end where we began – above us still, the white-washed walls and terracotta roofing. Luxurious city – city of pungent spices and royal treasures. City we dreamt of as a woman – a prize and a threat. Where is she now – that woman coveted by a long dead admiral?

For the '80s generation of New Zealand cricketers. Inspired by 'The Mask we Wear' – an article by former NZ cricket captain Martin Crowe.

Thoth Meditates on Imperial Hubris

Ian Irvine

I

After the soldiers strut and posture
After they slaughter and pillage,
Assault and subjugate – to prove their
Manhood – come the fierce pangs
Of remorse. Horrific dreams: bashed out
Brains of enemy children – terrified woman
(A prelude to rape). When Alexander
Arrives – his hands soaked in foreign blood –
The people call him ‘liberator’
As the Persians flee the pyramids.

II

But the liberators did not liberate – though
Quickly enchanted. I watch them summon
Old deities in the shadows of sullen monuments
(Beside the turbid Nile). ‘Teach us’ they beg me
‘To live beyond our guilt’. But the pyramids
Brood, the hieroglyphs go mute – as the
Olympians trek listless through marshy flats
And sandy wastes – ‘There are no crocodiles
Among the deities of Greece!’ Aware of sinister
Omens, Hermes appears at my temple.

III

‘Teach me, oh father, the oldest ways,
The deepest magic, the laws of Ma’at,
The creative power of words ... ‘ Imperial
Soldiers trade weapons for books – adopt local
Clothes and pretend to be Pharaohs. Amused,
I acquiesce – demand a wondrous library, a
Museum with rooms for philosophy and science,
Teaching and translation. A Great Library – ageless
Symbol of our hybrid population! Then settles
A tenuous peace – until the arrival of Christ.

The Great Library

(Per Medjat/Per Ankh)

Ian Irvine

'The Internet Archive operates 33 scanning centers in five countries, digitizing about 1,000 books a day for a total of over 2 million books, financially supported by libraries and foundations. As of July 2013, the collection included 4.4 million books with over 15 million downloads per month.' From Wikipedia article on The Internet Archive

Some choose worlds of power and debauchery – I choose Per Medjat, a House of Books. The algorithms make it infinite and self-renewing. Evolved to write and publish its own texts, it computes all cosmological laws and patterns then feeds me alien literatures – too much to absorb, but I'm not fussed: enough story to anaesthetize my final years! And the goggles erase the prison that is my invalid bed.

Let us go now to Alexandria – to the Great Library – I dream it more real than history.

I

See how they ransack the boats, friendly scribes loyal to the palace. Hungry for knowledge, dismissive of the usual bribes – prostitutes and opium leave them cold. But show them a Hebrew scroll and they leap about like baboons – your vessel is delayed a fortnight. They're polite to a fault: 'The state keeps the original – but we'll make you a good copy. Until then, enjoy Alexandria!'

Alexandria, sprawling, boisterous city of Hebrew mystics, Egyptians loyal to Ra and Isis, Greeks reciting Homer, Pythagoras or Plato. And others intent on new religions – Hermetists, Gnostics, Stoics. Each with their scrolls and parchments – so many volumes! authentic or forged, complete or fragmented.

My library is uncanny, it regenerates lost books – Seshat, the diligent librarian, acts as their midwife. Strange algorithms permit her a body – we talk as we translate, purchase scrolls or index new acquisitions. (My wife is ten years dead – so do not deny an old man his cybernetic re-creations. Better this than days of antiseptic boredom).
'Sesh' (verb) 'to write'. 'Sesh' (noun) 'scribe'.
'Seshat': 'patroness of scribes and libraries'.

II

But Alexandria is the least of it – we have built new wings, new floors, new columns carved with hieroglyphic evolutions – foreign alphabets, unborn languages and codes – alien scripts from distant galaxies. My library computes them all then authors me numerous frivolous or canonical permutations. All this my declining brain absorbs. All this as the hot Mediterranean sun bakes the fabulous architecture – the library, the causeway, the lighthouse on Pharos, the melting pot and the placid waves on white-sand beaches.

But the Ptolemites – fuelled by Hermesian volatility – lost something I’ve tried to restore to my postmodern scriptorium. That something was not in Israel, nor among the eastern Romans, nor was it to be found in the desert among camels and hermits (athletes of God). Instead, I looked to Hermapolis – to Thoth’s temple beside the primordial mound (beside the life-giving Nile).

Knowledge without heart engenders ruthless monsters – children of Isfet (chaos and suffering). Their loyalty is with Apophis – incarnation of programmer cruelty and biosemiotic violence. My library observes gentler commandments (and free of Pharaonic egotism). I speak of Ma’at – like Seshat she is beloved of the Ibis. I speak of the Greek Muses – and engineered a new Mouseion to honour them. All our volumes sing their praises. The library as soul oasis – a House of Books/ a House of Life.

III

You might think my library introverted but I have surrounded it with theatres, music auditoriums, temples, faculties for lecturers and their students, a circus, galleries for the arts (static and situationist), healing centres, precincts dedicated to the sciences – the side-walks, bazaars and malls hum with ideas and vital communications. Hard to know where the library ends and the city begins, such are the subterranean dependencies.

The Great Library catalogues all Open Books – but there are Closed Books noxious to life – incitements to violate the codes of Ma’at and the Muses. Our scholars spend long hours debating, and if needed, writing commentary on these artefacts to suffering and black magic. Words must not be treasured simply because they exist.

IV

Thank you for visiting – the nursing staff are kind but overworked – the food is nutritious. They say the prognosis isn’t good ... mere weeks. But enough about me – if you put on these goggles I’ll take you somewhere special!

Down this hallway are the libraries of innumerable possible pasts. All the books that might have been written. I visit this wing now and then – the truest antidote to remorse.

All the old libraries were organic matter made animate and volatile by mind. Alexandria’s digital resurrection promises new democracies of knowledge (and being). Library as sanctuary – vessel for spiritual alchemy. Read a book and select a friendly future.

These my conclusions (after long meditations): Culture as matter-mind communications – energy pulses in quantum fields. My library is networked – despite goggled immersion visitors don’t reject the world. The library’s core – though encrypted for protection – communicates with millions. My friendships are global (you need never be alone).

V

The opiates keep me comfortable – I want you to know that. This may be the last time we speak – I prefer the planetarium: its dappled Mediterranean light, its indoor plants, and soothing music. A good place to daydream as the medications muddy my thoughts in both worlds. I struggle to read anything now – even the podcasts seem fragmented. But she's with me as I drift in and out of consciousness – the librarian. Her perfumes, her gentleness, her vision for what must be created. Rest assured the Great Library will thrive beyond my passing.